

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION

BRENT LANG,

Petitioner,

Case No. 1:15-cv-771

v.

Honorable Robert J. Jonker

TONY TRIERWEILER,

Respondent.

_____ /

OPINION

This is a habeas corpus action brought by a state prisoner under 28 U.S.C. § 2254. Promptly after the filing of a petition for habeas corpus, the Court must undertake a preliminary review of the petition to determine whether “it plainly appears from the face of the petition and any exhibits annexed to it that the petitioner is not entitled to relief in the district court.” Rule 4, RULES GOVERNING § 2254 CASES; *see* 28 U.S.C. § 2243. If so, the petition must be summarily dismissed. Rule 4; *see Allen v. Perini*, 424 F.2d 134, 141 (6th Cir. 1970) (district court has the duty to “screen out” petitions that lack merit on their face). A dismissal under Rule 4 includes those petitions which raise legally frivolous claims, as well as those containing factual allegations that are palpably incredible or false. *Carson v. Burke*, 178 F.3d 434, 436-37 (6th Cir. 1999). After undertaking the review required by Rule 4, the Court will dismiss the petition without prejudice for failure to exhaust available state-court remedies.

Discussion

I. Factual allegations

Petitioner Brent Lang is incarcerated by the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) at Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility. Following a jury trial in Wayne County Circuit Court, Petitioner was convicted of multiple offenses: second-degree murder, Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.317; assault with intent to commit murder, Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.83; possession of a firearm by a felon (felon in possession), Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.224f; and possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony (felony-firearm), second-offense, Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.227b. On August 7, 2012, the trial court sentenced him to 30 years and 5 months to 60 years for the second-degree murder conviction, 22 years and 6 months to 35 years for the assault conviction, 1 to 5 years for the felon-in-possession conviction, and 5 years for the felony-firearm conviction.

Petitioner appealed his sentence and conviction to the Michigan Court of Appeals and the Michigan Supreme Court. The Michigan Court of Appeals affirmed the judgment of conviction on January 23, 2014. The Michigan Supreme Court denied leave to appeal on September 29, 2014, because it was not persuaded that the questions presented should be reviewed by that court. Based on a review of the docket sheet for his appellate proceedings, it appears that Petitioner did not file a petition for writ of certiorari with the United States Supreme Court.

Petitioner contends that several of his grounds for relief were raised on appeal from his conviction, but others were not; the latter are the subject of a motion for relief from judgment which is now pending in state court. Petitioner requests a stay of this action until the conclusion of the state-court proceedings.

II. Exhaustion of State Court Remedies

Before the Court may grant habeas relief to a state prisoner, the prisoner must exhaust remedies available in the state courts. 28 U.S.C. § 2254(b)(1); *O'Sullivan v. Boerckel*, 526 U.S. 838, 842 (1999). Exhaustion requires a petitioner to “fairly present” federal claims so that state courts have a “fair opportunity” to apply controlling legal principles to the facts bearing upon a petitioner’s constitutional claim. *See O'Sullivan*, 526 U.S. at 842; *Picard v. Connor*, 404 U.S. 270, 275-77 (1971), *cited in Duncan v. Henry*, 513 U.S. 364, 365 (1995), and *Anderson v. Harless*, 459 U.S. 4, 6 (1982). To fulfill the exhaustion requirement, a petitioner must have fairly presented his federal claims to all levels of the state appellate system, including the state’s highest court. *Duncan*, 513 U.S. at 365-66. “[S]tate prisoners must give the state courts one full opportunity to resolve any constitutional issues by invoking one complete round of the State’s established appellate review process.” *O'Sullivan*, 526 U.S. at 845.

An applicant has not exhausted available state remedies if he has the right under state law to raise, by any available procedure, the question presented. 28 U.S.C. § 2254(c). Petitioner asserts that he is pursuing a motion for relief from judgment in state court. Thus, the Court concludes that he has at least one available remedy. If his motion is denied by the circuit court, Petitioner must appeal that decision to the Michigan Court of Appeals and then to the Michigan Supreme Court in order to properly exhaust his claims. *See Duncan*, 513 U.S. at 365-66.

Petitioner has some claims that are exhausted and some that are not. As such, his petition is “mixed.” Under *Rose v. Lundy*, 455 U.S. 509, 522 (1982), district courts are directed to dismiss mixed petitions without prejudice in order to allow petitioners to exhaust available state remedies before pursuing relief under § 2254. However, since the habeas statute was amended to

impose a one-year statute of limitations on habeas claims, *see* 28 U.S.C. § 2244(d)(1), a dismissal could preclude future federal habeas review. This is particularly true after the Supreme Court ruled in *Duncan v. Walker*, 533 U.S. 167, 181-82 (2001), that the limitations period is not tolled during the pendency of a federal habeas petition. As a result, the Sixth Circuit adopted a stay-and-abeyance procedure to be applied to mixed petitions. *See Palmer v. Carlton*, 276 F.3d 777, 781 (6th Cir. 2002). In *Palmer*, the Sixth Circuit held that when the dismissal of a mixed petition could jeopardize the timeliness of a subsequent petition, the district court should dismiss only the unexhausted claims and stay further proceedings on the remaining portion until the petitioner has exhausted his claims in the state court. *Id.*; *see also Rhines v. Weber*, 544 U.S. 269, 277 (2007) (approving stay-and-abeyance procedure); *Griffin v. Rogers*, 308 F.3d 647, 652 n.1 (6th Cir. 2002).

Petitioner's application is subject to the one-year statute of limitations provided in 28 U.S.C. § 2244(d)(1). Under § 2244(d)(1)(A), the one-year limitations period runs from "the date on which the judgment became final by the conclusion of direct review or the expiration of the time for seeking such review." Petitioner appealed his conviction to the Michigan Court of Appeals and the Michigan Supreme Court. The Michigan Supreme Court denied his application for leave to appeal on September 29, 2014. Assuming that Petitioner did not petition for certiorari to the United States Supreme Court, the ninety-day period in which he could have sought review in the United States Supreme Court is counted under § 2244(d)(1)(A). *See Bronaugh v. Ohio*, 235 F.3d 280, 283 (6th Cir. 2000). The ninety-day period expired on Monday, December 29, 2014. Accordingly, absent tolling of the statute of limitations,¹ Petitioner would have one year, until December 29, 2015, in which to file his habeas petition.

¹The statute of limitations was tolled when Petitioner filed his motion for relief from judgment, and it will remain tolled for as long as the proceedings on that motion are pending in the state courts. 28 U.S.C. § 2244(d)(2).

The *Palmer* Court has indicated that thirty days is a reasonable amount of time for a petitioner to file a motion for post-conviction relief in state court, and another thirty days is a reasonable amount of time for a petitioner to return to federal court after he has exhausted his state-court remedies. *Palmer*, 276 F.3d at 781. *See also Griffin*, 308 F.3d at 653 (holding that sixty days amounts to a mandatory period of equitable tolling under *Palmer*). Petitioner has far more than sixty days remaining in his limitations period. If he diligently pursues his state-court remedies and promptly files a new petition under § 2254 after the Michigan Supreme Court issues a decision on his motion for relief from judgment, he is not in danger of running afoul of the statute of limitations. Should Petitioner decide not to pursue his unexhausted claims in the state courts, he may file a new petition raising only exhausted claims at any time before the expiration of the limitations period. Therefore, a stay of these proceedings is not warranted.

Conclusion

For the foregoing reasons, the Court will deny Petitioner's request for a stay and will dismiss the petition without prejudice for failure to exhaust available state-court remedies.

Certificate of Appealability

Under 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(2), the Court must determine whether a certificate of appealability should be granted. A certificate should issue if Petitioner has demonstrated a "substantial showing of a denial of a constitutional right." 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(2). This Court's dismissal of Petitioner's action under Rule 4 of the Rules Governing § 2254 Cases is a determination that the habeas action, on its face, lacks sufficient merit to warrant service. It would be highly unlikely for this Court to grant a certificate, thus indicating to the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals that an issue merits review, when the Court already has determined that the action is so lacking in merit

that service is not warranted. *See Love v. Butler*, 952 F.2d 10 (1st Cir. 1991) (it is “somewhat anomalous” for the court to summarily dismiss under Rule 4 and grant a certificate); *Hendricks v. Vasquez*, 908 F.2d 490 (9th Cir. 1990) (requiring reversal where court summarily dismissed under Rule 4 but granted certificate); *Dory v. Comm’r of Corr.*, 865 F.2d 44, 46 (2d Cir. 1989) (it was “intrinsically contradictory” to grant a certificate when habeas action does not warrant service under Rule 4); *Williams v. Kullman*, 722 F.2d 1048, 1050 n.1 (2d Cir. 1983) (issuing certificate would be inconsistent with a summary dismissal).

The Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals has disapproved the issuance of blanket denials of a certificate of appealability. *Murphy v. Ohio*, 263 F.3d 466 (6th Cir. 2001). Rather, the district court must “engage in a reasoned assessment of each claim” to determine whether a certificate is warranted. *Id.* at 467. Each issue must be considered under the standards set forth by the Supreme Court in *Slack v. McDaniel*, 529 U.S. 473 (2000). *Murphy*, 263 F.3d at 467. Consequently, this Court has examined each of Petitioner’s claims under the *Slack* standard.

This Court denied Petitioner’s application on the procedural ground of lack of exhaustion. Under *Slack*, 529 U.S. at 484, when a habeas petition is denied on procedural grounds, a certificate of appealability may issue only “when the prisoner shows, at least, [1] that jurists of reason would find it debatable whether the petition states a valid claim of the denial of a constitutional right and [2] that jurists of reason would find it debatable whether the district court was correct in its procedural ruling.” Both showings must be made to warrant the grant of a certificate. *Id.* The Court finds that reasonable jurists could not debate that this Court correctly dismissed the petition on the procedural ground of lack of exhaustion. “Where a plain procedural bar is present and the district court is correct to invoke it to dispose of the case, a reasonable jurist could

not conclude either that the district court erred in dismissing the petition or that the petitioner should be allowed to proceed further.” *Id.* Therefore, the Court denies Petitioner a certificate of appealability.

An Order and Judgment consistent with this Opinion will be entered.

/s/Robert J. Jonker
Robert J. Jonker
Chief United States District Judge

Dated: August 6, 2015